Mestiçagem, Malandragem, e Antropofagia: 
How Forró Is Emblematic of Brazilian National Identity

A relatively recent cultural phenomenon (dating from the mid-twentieth century), forró music arose in the Brazilian northeast “backlands” and has since developed into a national “treasure” of folkloric “tradition.” This paper – part of a much larger ethnographic project - seeks to situate a particular style of forró music at the epicenter of an “imagined community” which Brazilians look toward as a major source of national identity. In this presentation I will show that mestizagem, malandragem, and antropofagia - three traditions conspicuously present in any scholarly discussion of Brazilian identity – are strikingly present in forró music and performance, making forró emblematic of national identity for a large part of the Brazilian population.

Forró, a modern rural music, takes its name from a nineteenth-century dance form called forró-bodo. Like other young Brazilian musics, it is constantly evolving, though a “traditional” base line has been conserved by several “roots” bands – it is this “traditional” music, called forró pé-de-serra, that provides the soundtrack to the imagined community I claim many Brazilians reinforce their national identity. The pé-de-serra style is generally played by three-piece bands including an accordion, a triangle, and a double-headed bass drum called the “zabumba.” (The two more recent – and quite popular - styles which I have not linked to my analysis are more synthesized versions called forró universitário and forró estilizado.) While credit for developing present-day forró goes to Luis Gonzaga, its genealogy traces back many more generations to the zabumba ensemble groups of the northeast, which featured the aforementioned bass drum along with several fife and fiddle players.

Mestiçagem: the make-up of forró music

Even prior to the 1940s and 50s, these ensembles were creating several regional forms of music by combining European, African, and indigenous influences. In this region, Portuguese melodies were mixed with African dances like the lundu, which were then impacted by indigenous music. The “ethnic” origin of the instruments, too, is contested: for decades, northeastern scholars and musicians have cited African, European, and indigenous genealogies for the components of this music. The “mixed” music, then, reflects the mixing of the “three races” of Brazil and thus locates itself in the midst of a Freyrian discourse of national identity. The claim of forró as a quintessential example of Brazilian cultural heterogeneity should be familiar: extensive scholarly writings analyze samba as the first “national” music of Brazil, having risen to its prominence as the sine qua non signifier of Brazilian culture precisely because of the stylistic impact of tripartite

1 In my argument (pace Anderson 1983), members of this “imagined community” have a common notion of “traditional” forró pé-de-serra music (often perpetuated through cultural images in film, literature, music, or dance contexts, etc.) which becomes indexically related to the word: forró. Many may never even participate in this music culture, but they will perpetuate their imaginings to others along the way through the imagery and discourse of everyday life.
ethnic mixing in song. I assert that a hidden and unpublished discourse – perpetuated not by academics but by local musicians and audiences - has, for several decades, built up exactly the same claim about forró, and that Brazilians interpolate and act out an imagined national identity through forró music (as much as through samba).

**Malandragem: forró as soundtrack to Brazilian mischievousness**

In July 2003 I traveled throughout northeast Brazil in search of the elusive “imagined community,” mistakenly accepting all music billed as “forró” to fit the perimeters. Instead, there has been a move – mostly in middle and upper-lower urban classes – to legitimize only forró pé-de-serra as the music emblematic of Brazil’s “roots.” Thus the five hours that I spent dancing at a forró show at the Salvador fairgrounds (with hourly choreographed performances by big-name bands with synthesizers and front-lining female dancers) was termed “child’s play” by my informant (a middle-class woman from São Paulo). What she encourages me to research, instead, are the small three-person acoustic bands who play “old favorites” (the two dozen songs written and first performed by the beloved Luis Gonzaga) and dress in the stylized cangaceiro (or backlands bandit) costumes. When I push her to explain more, she becomes exasperated and tells me that if I want to study forró I must find a tiny town in the middle of the sertão, for there they have forró parties all the time. “Like in the movie ‘Eu, tu eles’?” I ask her. Finally at ease at the mention of the popular film released nationally in 2000, she nods emphatically. “Yes, exactly!” “Does the movie represent the most typical forró?” I ask her. “Oh, yes” she replies, “the most típico.”

The major themes of *Eu, tu, eles* are of drought and hardship, and of human suffering (mostly as a result of the barren land, though also because of conservative social structures) negotiated by malandragem. One of the most commonly cited examples of Brazilian ingenuity and cultural identity, malandragem is the wily practice of breaking rules and status quo in order to come out on top. Almost always male, the malandro is adept at talking his opponents in circles until they are eating out of his hand. While *Eu, tu, eles* breaks the malandro stereotype with Darlene’s starring role as female rebel, the film reinforces forró pé-de-serra performance as an act of malandragem. The soundtrack features two types of music: an excruciatingly slow single-instrument line, contrasted with a euphorically upbeat forró band. And predictably, the former plays as background to reminders of parched land and depression – while the latter set the tone for Darlene’s various acts of rebellion.

Several other movie soundtracks have employed forró pé-de-serra to the same ends: in *Bye Bye Brasil* (1979) the flighty accordionist Ciço bucks familial responsibility to play on the road, and in *Baile Perfumado* (1997), the ultimate rebel - cangaceiro Lampião - and his partner Maria Bonita dance to forró even while they elude local law enforcement.

**Antropofagia: cangaceiro cannibalisms as icons of forró**

The imagery of Lampião and Maria Bonita have imbued forró with far more than their rebel status, though. While Lampião became renowned as a ruthlessly dangerous and volatile “Robin Hood” of the northeast, he also became enmeshed in one aspect of Brazil’s transnational cultural “anthropophagy.” In the 1920s and 30s – at the height of Lampião’s celebrity – North American Western films were in vogue throughout Brazil, and especially in the northeast sertão, where a geographic and cultural empathy with the “wild west” seems apparent. Though cangaço violence was arguably of Brazilian origin, cangaceiro heroes resembled the cowboy actors from the north and, I argue, came to be linked in the imagination of Brazilians. Yet this was not cultural imperialism or importation; like in so many other cultural categories, the Brazilians
“anthropophagized” these images, taking them in and re-making them in their own creative reinterpretation. In this way the cangaceiro culture fits within a major stream of national identity, re-asserting Brazilianness through the ability to synthesize and re-create foreign elements.

Thus when Luiz Gonzaga donned a cangaceiro hat (a leather hat whose brims were folded back and approximates an American cowboy hat set sideways) to enhance the “local color” of his performances, the marketing ploy had an anthropophagic effect that is still reverberating throughout the forró pé-de-serra scene. Now expected attire for any “traditional” forró musician, the leather hat reflects the endless ingenuity of Brazilians, a standard by which their national identity is consistently measured.

Further proof of the anthropophagic character of forró music comes from Jackson do Pandeiro, one of forró’s primary singer-songwriters. His name derives from Jack Perry, a well-received actor in cowboy westerns. I argue here that, contrary to Perrone and Dunn’s argument that he was seeking “legitimacy or prestige through linguistic association with the center,” this is just one other case in which the artist cleverly used U.S. influences to reassert his own Brazilianness. The same also applies to the “urban myth” I so often hear when I ask Brazilians about the word forró: more often than not, Brazilians emphatically insist that “forró” is derived from a Brazilian pronunciation of North American dances called “For all” that were hosted for poor workers throughout the northeast. In fact, it seems more likely that this myth is reiterated in order to reinforce the notion that Brazilians can always improve upon any cultural importation. That is, in Brazilian nationalist imaginings, forró may have been financed by a few English-speaking foreigners, but its content is entirely Brazilian.

Conclusion:

The forró pé-de-serra that I have been describing constitutes an interesting “imagined community,” as so few of the Brazilians who identify with forró as a representation of national culture actually experience or perform the “imagined” culture. In fact, I argue here that the national registers of “traditional” forró serve as ideal projections of identity that are constantly available for Brazilian people but seldom acted out. Instead, Brazilians access and perpetuate this folkloric heritage through discourse and imagery. After all, forró pé-de-serra - with its ethnically diverse geneology, its links to malandragem in media images, and its iconic anthropophagic constructions – represents a heroic, creative, and ultimately Brazilian music. Who wouldn’t identify?

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2 Perrone and Dunn 2001: 3.